Doing the right things;  
Rightly doing the right things
FACTORS SHAPING DECISION-MAKING IN RESEARCH

- Ethical frameworks
- Ethical regulation, professional guidelines, disciplinary norms
- Legal regulation
- Individual moral framework

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FACTORS SHAPING DECISION-MAKING IN RESEARCH

INDIVIDUAL MORAL FRAMEWORK: All individuals have a moral outlook about what is right and wrong that guides their behavior. This moral outlook is shaped by individuals’ experiences and interactions and the specific moral beliefs held are inevitably individual.

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LEGAL REGULATION:
Researchers are legally obliged to conform with legal regulation relating to their research. There are a number of laws that have a bearing on research; these relate to consent, confidentiality, privacy, data protection and copyright.

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FACTORS SHAPING DECISION-MAKING IN RESEARCH

ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS: These approaches or frameworks provide a means of thinking about moral behavior. They provide some criteria against which researchers can consider what it is right or wrong to do when presented with an ethical dilemma. The most common approaches are consequentialist, principlist, non-consequentialist, ethics of care and virtue ethics.

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FACTORS SHAPING DECISION-MAKING IN RESEARCH

CONSEQUENTIALIST APPROACHES argue that ethical decisions should be based on the consequences of specific actions so that an action is morally right if it will produce a good outcome for an individual or for wider society. In consequentialism, the more ‘good’ consequences that result from an act, the better or more right is the act; no act is seen as inherently wrong as judgments are based on the outcome of the act.

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NON-CONSEQUENTIALIST APPROACHES argue that consideration of matters other than the ends produced by actions need to be considered and that ethical decisions should be based on notions of what it is morally right to do regardless of the consequences. PRINCIPLIST approaches are a form of non-consequentialist approach. This approach draws on the principles of respect for people’s autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice in making and guiding ethical decisions in research.

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PRINCIPLIST. Respect for autonomy relates to issues of voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Beneficence concerns the responsibility to do good, non-maleficence concerns the responsibility to avoid harm and justice concerns the importance of the benefits and burdens of research being distributed equally. Central to a principlist approach is that consent must be freely given and that potential participants should not be subject to any encouragement (or coercion) to take part such as that arising from payment for participation or power relations between researcher and participant.
An ETHICS OF CARE approach involves the making of ethical decisions on the basis of care, compassion and a desire to act in ways that benefit the individual or group who are the focus of research, recognizing the relationality and interdependency of researchers and research participants. Some key features of the approach involves: meeting the needs of others; recognizing emotions; recognizing people’s relationality and interdependence; and respecting and seeking the views of others and their moral claims. This is an approach used in much feminist and participatory research.
VIRTUE ETHICS is person-based; it focuses on the virtue or moral character of the researcher rather than principles, rules or consequences of an act or decision. Virtue ethics draws on the notion of researcher integrity and seeks to identify the characteristics or virtues that a researcher needs in order to behave in morally (or ethically) ‘good’ ways. Virtues such as courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity are ideals which researchers strive for.
PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL GUIDELINES: There are many professional guidelines and codes aimed at providing frameworks to enable researchers to think through the ethical challenges that they encounter in their research. These guidelines shape the decisions that researchers make about procedural and emergent ethical issues.
FACTORS SHAPING DECISION-MAKING IN RESEARCH

ETHICAL REGULATION:
Researchers are subject to ethical review procedures through a research ethics committee (REC). RECs assess voluntary informed consent, the confidentiality of information provided by participants, the anonymity of study participants, the avoidance of harm and researcher integrity.

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Informed Consent

**INFORMED CONSENT** involves providing participants with clear information about what participating in a research project will involve and giving them the opportunity to decide whether or not they want to participate.

Specifically, research participants need to be made aware of: what the research is about; why it is being conducted; who is funding it; what will happen to the results and how they will be disseminated; what their participation in the project will involve; what the potential risks and benefits of their involvement might be; and, how issues of anonymity and confidentiality will be managed.

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Potential research participants should also be made aware that they are not obliged to take part and that they can withdraw from the study if they later change their mind about participating.

While recognizing that intentions to ‘fully inform’ participants may be problematic, it is also important to note that there are some research projects in which participants cannot be fully informed about the research before it takes place; to do so would render the research impossible to undertake.
Informed Consent: Providing Information

The provision of information about a project is an important part of ensuring that potential participants understand what participating in a research project might entail.

**ISSUES:** How much information to provide; when to provide information; how often to repeat information; how would data be collected and how will they be written up and disseminated in public.
Informed Consent: Encouraging participation

The issue of whether or not some form of recompense, either financial or material, should be given to research participants as part of the process of consent is a subject of some debate. Recompense can be viewed as an incentive or inducement that may offer considerable encouragement for some groups to participate in research, who might without the ‘reward’ offered decline to participate.

The challenges that ‘rewards’ for participation pose for informed consent can be offset by not informing participants that they will be paid until after they have agreed to participate. In this way, any payment or benefit becomes a ‘thank you’ for participating rather than an incentive.
Informed Consent: Recording consent

The process of gaining consent involves researchers obtaining evidence that participants have consented to take part in a research project and have an understanding of the key issues involved.

In practice it is common that researchers use signed consent forms, but in some situations, this may be problematic. The challenge for researchers is to find a way to record that study participants give their informed consent to participate in a project. Signed consent does not necessarily achieve this any better than other methods.
Informed Consent: Capacity to consent

There are some groups for whom questions of capacity or ‘competence’ to provide consent are raised. These groups include children and young people, people with intellectual disability and people with some physical and/or mental illness and disability.

Assessing capacity to consent is, in many cases, a judgment made by researchers. This involves being sensitive to the needs of particular individuals, providing appropriate materials to help to explain the research and engaging with them in ways that suit their styles of communicating. Proxy consent, that is consent given by someone, usually a relative or carer, on behalf of someone else, is rarely used in social research.

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ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
Anonymity and confidentiality

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality are key considerations in ethical research practice and, in common with informed consent, are concepts that underpin professional research guidelines for social scientists.

Confidentiality is commonly understood as akin to the principles of privacy and respect for autonomy. Confidentiality is taken to mean that identifiable information about individuals collected during the process of research will not be disclosed.

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Anonymity and confidentiality

Confidentiality may mean that specific information provided in the process of research will not be used at all if the participant requests this (sometimes referred to as ‘off the record’ comments).

A deliberate breach of confidentiality would involve telling a parent what a child had said in an interview or telling a health professional what a patient participant had said without the study participant’s consent.

An accidental breach of confidentiality would involve someone being identified through information that a researcher provided about an individual even though they had not named them.

"According to your HIPAA release form I can’t share anything with you.”

Baymcp.com

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Anonymity and confidentiality

Accidental disclosures can occur when researchers discuss their research with peers (or others), in the process of presenting research at conferences or other forums and in publications.

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The primary way that researchers seek to protect research participants from the accidental breaking of confidentiality is through the process of anonymisation, which occurs through the use of pseudonyms applied to research participants, organizations and locations.
Anonymity and confidentiality

Pseudonyms are generally chosen by the researcher, but are sometimes given by a transcriber or suggested by participants.

Pseudonyms are often given to locations; however, the descriptions and/or images provided, as noted above, make it relatively easy to identify, or at least make an educated guess, where a study is located.

“On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

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Risk and safety

While much qualitative research may pose only minimal risks to participants it is important not to disregard the risks that can occur, particularly in research on topics which are in some way ‘sensitive’ because they focus on personal issues, taboo issues or issues which pose a threat for those participating in it.
Assessments of risk involve considerations of the potential for harm, both physical and psychological or emotional, as well as practical issues such as the costs participants might incur as a result of participating in research in terms of money, time and inconvenience.
Risk and safety

Assessments of risk, harm and benefit are far from straightforward. It is not possible to identify all risks that an individual might encounter from participating in research.

The important point to note is that while it is important that researchers think carefully about potential risks and benefits of participating in research and inform participants so that they can decide whether or not they want to take part, neither researchers nor participants necessarily know what issues might emerge in the process of the research.

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Risk and safety: Types of risk

Risks to participants’ psychological or emotional well-being

**Emotional response during data collection.** Embarrassment, humiliation or anxiety can occur in response to insensitive questions, questions or tasks that the research participant feels unable to answer or do, or topics or tasks that explore participants’ underlying fears. Participants may also feel devalued if they feel their views are disregarded or not taken seriously.

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Risk and safety: *Types of risk*

Risks to participants’ psychological or emotional well-being

Participants can feel they were used by researchers. Researchers sometimes do engage in various activities to manipulate participants to participate in research and to provide rich data. Such activities may leave participants feeling used after the research is completed and the researcher has exited from their lives, particularly if their expectations of benefits are not met.

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Risks to participants’ psychological or emotional well-being

Risks to participants can arise from the publication and dissemination of research. Despite anonymisation, people may be upset at how they are portrayed in research reports. Studies may also bring unwanted publicity, and media attention, to a research site given that the anonymisation of specific communities is notoriously difficult.

Publication may also pose other risks where an individual’s identity is disclosed, such as censure from others which might in some cases result in loss of friendship or employment. In research on political activity or illegal activity more extreme risks, including risk of physical harm or legal sanctions, might be present.
Risk and safety: *Types of risk*

Risks concern the costs incurred, both financial and personal, from participating in research.

Such costs might be a loss of earnings incurred by taking time out to participate in research. Participants might also experience inconvenience; the time spent in participating in a project means they have less time to do other things they might want or need to do. Some of these factors can be offset, to some degree, by offering payments to participants in recognition of their contribution.
Managing risks to researchers throughout a research project is an important, and often neglected, consideration.
Risk and safety: Risk to researchers

**Physical risks** ‘Physical’ risks comprise actual physical harm or threat of physical harm.

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Risk and safety: Risk to researchers

Physical risks

Risk of physical harm can occur when conducting research in some locations or settings. For example, the risk of illness and disease, particularly when working in “toxic” or “disease-inflicted” places, should not be overlooked. Safety should be taken into account in researches conducted in war zones or areas in which there is political or social unrest. Dangers may also exist when conducting research in unfamiliar settings and cultures which do not, on the face of it, present obvious dangers.
Risk and safety: Risk to researchers

**Physical risks**

Risks associated with particular topics are closely linked with the location of research. Research focusing on activities defined as illegal or deviant in some way, such as drug use, football hooliganism and a range of criminal activities, may raise a number of risks of physical harm to researchers.
Risk and safety: Risk to researchers

*Emotional risks* This can include emotional trauma and, more commonly, emotional distress.

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Risk and safety: Risk to researchers

Emotional risks

In much research, particularly research on ‘sensitive’ topics such as sexual abuse, suicide, terminal illness, bereavement and family breakdown, this involves researchers listening to people’s experiences of hardship, grief, loss or fear. Such research can leave researchers feeling emotionally distressed and there is considerable evidence that this is widespread among qualitative researchers (Bloor et al, 2007: 44).
Emotional trauma can result from distressing memories on the part of the researcher being generated by the research. Emotional difficulties can also result from the process of observing practices or hearing about experiences or views to which a researcher is morally opposed but to which they are obliged to ‘go along with’ in order to avoid jeopardizing the research.
Other emotional difficulties that researchers have reported while in the field are feelings of isolation and lack of support. This is a particular issue for PhD students who, despite supervision, tend to work alone while in the field. It is also an issue for researchers working in unfamiliar surroundings, a particular issue for many anthropologists.

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